

天主教輔仁大學英國語文學系學士班畢業成果  
ENGLISH DEPARTMENT, FU JEN CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY  
GRADUATION PROJECT 2020

指導教授：包磊思老師

Dr. John Basourakos

真善美聖

**From Hansel to Hedwig: The Influences of Gender Binarism  
on Hedwig's Struggles Toward Gender Identification in  
*Hedwig and the Angry Inch***

學生：楊雅甯 撰

Irene, Ya-Ning Yang

Fu Jen Catholic University

From Hansel to Hedwig: The Influences of Gender Binarism on Hedwig's Struggles

Toward Gender Identification in *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*

Forth Draft

Irene Yang

CCIII – Section D

Dr. John Basourakos

June 21, 2019

## Abstract

Written and directed by John Cameron Mitchell, the film *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* depicts the journey of a transgender person searching for freedom and love, struggling with her identity, and finally learning to accept and to love herself and her body. By focusing on the protagonist Hedwig's sexually ambiguous body and the conflicts she endures while finding her true self, the film aims to challenge people's ideas about gender binarism and heterosexual normativity and to engage them to reconsider prevalent definitions of gender. By referring to the theory of gender advanced by theorist Judith Butler, this paper argues that gender normativity, gender stereotypes and gender expectations based on gender binarism affect how Hedwig defines herself in terms of gender. Due to the influences of gender binarism, Hedwig changes her biological sex, her gender expression and her gender identity to try to fit into the category of masculinity or of femininity. After a series of conflicts with her partners and within herself, despite her attempts to extricate herself from the abject zone between binary gender categories, Hedwig continues to live her life as an androgynous person.

## Outline

### I. Introduction

A. Hedwig performing a song with her rock band about a major turn in her life, a failed transgender surgery which made her the “new Berlin Wall”

B. Questions about the change from Hansel to Hedwig

C. Thesis statement: *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* reveals that the socially and culturally constructed concept of gender binarism affects Hedwig’s changes in terms of biological sex, in terms of how she expresses her gender identity, and in terms of how she identifies herself as male and/or female.

### II. Body

A. Gender and Gender Binarism

1. Definition of gender by Judith Butler

a. A person’s repetitive performance of gender

b. Gender expectations, gender stereotypes, and gender norms:

characterization of the role of man and woman

c. Gender: shaped by external authorities

2. Gender Binarism

- a. Division of gender into two recognized genders and sexes (Dentice & Dietert 26)
- b. Gender identity expected to align with biological sex (Dentice & Dietert 25)
- c. Gender binarism challenged in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century (Jones 449)

## B. Synopsis of *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*

### 1. Life as Hansel

- a. Born and raised in East Berlin
- b. Going through transgender surgery to legally get married to first husband Luther

### 2. Life as Hedwig

- a. Abandoned by Luther and later falls in love with Tommy
- b. Songs stolen by Tommy after Tommy flees from her lost genital
- c. Following Tommy and performing with her band the Angry Inch
- d. Finding wholeness within herself after realizing what she wanted

## C. Influences of Gender Binarism on Hedwig's Behaviors and Decisions

1. Hedwig's Biological Sex

- a. Hansel's body viewed using gender stereotypes by Luther
- b. Transgender surgery: reinforcement of gender binary (Siebler 126)

which helps align the physical body to gender identity (Siebler 129)

- c. Hansel failing to pass as woman completely to legitimize the marriage with Luther and in terms of "the heterosexual law" (Mayer 85)

2. Hedwig's Gender Expression

- a. Assuming a female role despite the botched transgender surgery
- b. Doing drag on stage
  - i. Lack of agreement between femininity and birth sex (Sullivan 86)
  - ii. "A male homosexual negotiation of transsexual panic" (Jones 450)

3. Hedwig's Gender Identification

- a. Plato's *Symposium*: a "guiding metaphor of Hansel's life" (Jones 451)
- b. Ambiguous identity protected by the veil of "reinforced femininity" and a "supposed heterosexuality" in relationships (Mayer 85)
- c. Finding wholeness within herself after performing the role of woman no longer and identifying outside of binary gender categories (Jones

452)

### III. Conclusion

A. Restate the thesis statement: *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* reveals that the

socially and culturally constructed concept of gender binarism affects

Hedwig's changes in terms of biological sex, in terms of how she expresses

her gender identity, and in terms of how she identifies herself as male and/or

female.

B. Main claims

1. Biological sex: passing from man to woman following heterosexual desire
2. Gender expression: assuming the role of woman by performing according to social expectations of how women should behave
3. Gender identification: struggling to align identity with an ambiguous body and ending up with an identity as neither a man nor woman

## 1. Introduction

“Six inches forward and five inches back. I got a – I got an angry inch”

(*Hedwig*). Swinging her head and stomping her feet to the beat, a female vocalist wearing a tank top and skinny jeans sings her lungs out about her transgender surgery that has gone wrong. This is Hedwig rocking the stage in a small restaurant with her band, the Angry Inch. As she sings “Angry Inch” and as the song heats up the atmosphere, Hedwig tells the audience how she became the “new Berlin Wall” “standing before you in the divide between East and West/slavery and freedom/man and woman” (*Hedwig*). Why, one may ask, did Hedwig go through a botched sex-change operation? One may also wonder how a boy from East Berlin turns into “an international ignored song stylist barely standing before [the audience]” (*Hedwig*). *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* reveals that the socially and culturally constructed concept of gender binarism affects Hedwig’s changes in terms of biological sex, in terms of how she expresses her gender identity, and in terms of how she identifies herself as male and/or female.

This research paper offers a textual analysis of the musical film *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* written and directed by John Cameron Mitchell. The paper is divided into



the following sections: the introduction, the literature review, the analysis of the film, and the conclusion. In the first section of the research paper, I offer an introduction with a clear thesis statement followed by the critical perspective that I use to discuss the film. In the following section, I offer a critical analysis of the film by relying on the secondary sources that I have consulted, and by quoting from dialogue the film as well as describing particular situations to support my arguments. Lastly, I conclude my research paper by restating my thesis statement and summarizing the main claims of my analysis.



## 2. Literature Review

In “Growing Up Trans: Socialization and the Gender Binary,” Michelle Dietert and Dianne Dentice argue that gender binarism is the socially constructed classification of gender into two sexes and genders. How families, peers and people from social surroundings react to transgender teenagers’ transsexuality shows that gender norms and gender expectations are enforced on children by parents and teachers, especially when they learn about the children’s transgender identity. In “Reading and Queering Plato in *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*,” Wendy Hsu discusses how Plato’s *Symposium* depicts the split of female, male and androgynous human figures which causes the divided parts to search for their other halves to become whole again. Hsu then argues that Hedwig, with a genital that is neither male nor female, does not belong to any of the traditional gender categories and thus disrupts the conventional binary of masculinity and femininity.

In “Gender Without Genitals: Hedwig’s Six Inches,” Jordy Jones avers that drag presents a homosexual man’s negotiation of transsexual panic. Jones also discusses how Hedwig’s relationships with her parents and with her lovers influence her, and how love, sexuality and transsexuality are presented in the film. In “Negotiating

Identity in the Abject Zone in John Cameron Mitchell's *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*,”

Claudia Santos Mayer points out that for Judith Butler, one does not become a man or a woman but rather becomes someone who performs the actions which are set to determine one's gender. Throughout the film, Hedwig struggles with her identity under the prevailing binary system of gender and tries to negotiate her identity to fit into the gender category created by her society.

In “Transgender Transitions: Sex/Gender Binaries in the Digital Age,” Kay Siebler argues that going through transgender surgery and receiving hormone shots are actions of “passing” to the opposite biological sex and into the heterosexual world which reinforce the concept of gender binarism. Siebler also argues that the false image of the “transgender” person presented by media makes transgender people struggle with their identities. In “Performance, Performativity, Parody, and Politics,” Nikki Sullivan discusses the performativity of gender proposed by Judith Butler, which means that gender is not the expression of an innate identity but the repetition of actions and gestures set by a society or a culture to determine gender. Sullivan also avers that, for Butler, drag is the parody of gender which suggests a lack of agreement between sex, gender and performance.

### 3. Research Questions

This paper aims to address the following research questions:

1. What is gender and gender binarism and how are these concepts depicted in the film *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*?
2. How does Hedwig identify herself in terms of gender and how does gender binarism influence Hedwig's gender identification in the film *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*?
3. How does Plato's *Symposium* influence Hedwig's cognition of love and gender in the film *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*?
4. How does Hedwig challenge gender binarism and heterosexual normativity in the film *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*?

### 4. Research Methodology

This research paper is based on a 2001 musical comedy-drama film *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* directed by John Cameron Mitchell. The textual analysis is based on scholarly articles and books about the film and theories about gender to help me analyze the character Hedwig, and to discuss how socially and culturally constructed

gender norms influence Hedwig. The first part of this paper discusses gender binarism and concepts about gender constructed by the general society and by different cultures, such as gender expectations, gender norms and gender stereotypes. The second part of the paper discusses the life of Hedwig based on an analysis of *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*. The third part of the paper explores how gender binarism influences Hedwig's decisions and behaviors. *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* is about a man from East Berlin whose transgender surgery has failed and this causes him to struggle to find a spot in a society of two sexes, which are assigned by birth, and of two genders, which are the social roles based on one's biological sex. The transsexuality and intersexuality depicted in the film can challenge an audience's general understanding of sex and gender.

The first article "Growing Up Trans: Socialization and the Gender Binary" discusses social and cultural understandings of gender identity through a study of the reactions which transgender teenagers receive from family, peers and social surroundings when growing up. The second article "Reading and Queering Plato in *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*" discusses the perceptions of division and of wholeness which Hedwig learned from reading Plato's *Symposium* and examines Hedwig's

relationships with her partners to see Hedwig's transformation as a non-typical male-to-female transsexual person. The third article "Gender Without Genitals: Hedwig's Six Inches" deals with gender politics displayed in the film by analyzing the characters, the relationships between them and the concepts of gender and love the film addresses. In the fourth article "Negotiating Identity in the Abject Zone in John Cameron Mitchell's *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*," Mayer discusses the theorist Judith Butler's ideas about sex and gender as discussed in *Bodies that Matter*. Mayer analyzes how Hedwig's identity changes in order to fit into gender categories set up by the society she lives in throughout her life.

The fifth article "Transgender Transitions: Sex/Gender Binaries in the Digital Age" explores misunderstandings and misinterpretations about "transgender" caused by the media and how false ideas of "transgenderism" influence the identity of those whose gender identities do not align with their biological sexes. The sixth article "Performance, Performativity, Parody, and Politics" explains how, in Judith Butler's opinion, gender is performative, and how this performativity is reinterpreted by other theorists.

## 5. Textual Analysis of *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*.

According to theorist Judith Butler, gender is a performance which is socially constructed. In her article “Performance, Performativity, and Politics,” scholar Sullivan explains that for Butler, gender is “neither natural nor innate, but rather, is a social construct which serves particular purposes and institutions” (82). Gender is not an expression of one’s identity. It is the representation of the actions, gestures, and other behaviors shared within a culture where a person belongs. Those actions, gestures, and behaviors are the gender role expectations, gender stereotypes, or gender norms which the society thinks can characterize the role of a man or a woman. In addition, gender is not determined by one’s innate self. Instead, gender is shaped by external authorities such as language, gender roles, and genitals (Mayer 82). For instance, in language, the pronoun “he” is used to refer to male while “she” refers to female (Mayer 82). As for gender roles, girls are expected to wear dresses instead of pants, and to play with dolls instead of “GI Joe” (Dentice & Dietert 34).

The basis of gender expectations, gender stereotypes and gender norms which determine one’s gender is gender binarism, which is a system that suggests that “there are usually two recognized genders and two recognized sexes” (Dentice & Dietert 25).

Due to gender binarism, the idea that one's "gender identity should align with biological sex" emerges (Dentice & Dietert 25). Consequently, people are expected to wear clothes and to participate in activities which fit the characteristics of their own genders, and to take on the social roles which are specified for their genders. Despite this deeply rooted interpretation of gender, gender binarism is challenged in queer and transgender theories proposed in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century (Jones 449). According to new perspectives introduced in queer and transgender theories, gender is "not a binary, but rather a spectrum" (Jones 449). Set in the late 1980s to early 90s, the story in the film *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* also conflicts with the idea of gender binarism by depicting the journey of Hedwig, a transgender character, who suffers from criticism and hurt finally accept herself as who she is.

Born in East Berlin in 1961, the year when the Berlin Wall was erected, Hansel Schmidt was raised by his German mother and American G.I. father. At the age of 26, Hansel met his first lover Luther, an American G.I. who proposed to Hansel and asked Hansel to go to America with him. Despite his rejection of the idea of becoming a woman, Hansel still went through the transgender surgery to pursue love and freedom in America, taking his mother's name, Hedwig. Unfortunately, the



operation failed, leaving Hedwig “a one-inch mound of flesh” which was not the genital of either man or woman. One year later, Luther abandoned Hedwig for a young boy.

After the divorce, Hedwig met her second lover Tommy when she was babysitting Tommy’s baby sibling. The two attracted each other with their shared passion for rock music. After Hedwig taught Tommy everything she knew about rock music, Tommy was scared off by Hedwig’s lost genitals and shot to fame with the songs written by Hedwig. Betrayed and hurt, Hedwig formed a rock band the Angry Inch and insisted on performing the songs stolen by Tommy. When Hedwig was chasing after Tommy to be given credit as the songwriter of the songs Tommy had stolen and for love, Hedwig found that instead of fame and recognition, she was looking for “the possibility of defining herself independently of the configuration of her body and the need to make it fit in one of the hetero categories available” (Mayer 87). At the end of the film, Hedwig got rid of her façade which hid the configuration of her body and walked naked into the night as neither a he nor a she.

Throughout the film, gender binarism plays an important role in Hedwig’s life as she grew into the body of a boy, changed her biological sex, dressed like a woman

and finally settled in her position in society as a person in between man and woman.

Before the transgender surgery, Hedwig, or Hansel at that time, was “boyed” with the name “Hansel,” according to his sex characteristic as a male (Jones 455). On the day when Luther spotted Hansel sunbathing near the Berlin Wall, since Hansel lied facing down, all Luther saw was Hansel’s pale backside of his slim figure. “Girl, I sure don’t mean to annoy you” (*Hedwig*) was the first thing Luther said to Hansel as he assumed Hansel was a girl judging from Hansel’s physicality. Luther was taken aback the moment Hansel turned over and revealed his sexual organ. Luther then remarked, “Damn, Hansel. I can’t believe you’re not a girl. You look so fine” (*Hedwig*), indicating that Luther was looking at Hansel with stereotypes of what a boy’s and a girl’s bodies should look like. Later on, Hansel faced a transgender operation in order to get married.

According to Siebler, transgender surgery is meant for a person whose gender identity is not the same with the sex assigned at birth to be “a masculine male or a feminine female” (125). The change in biological sex, or “passing” as Siebler phrases it, is “an act that reinforces the gender binary” (126) and that helps “ascribe [physical body] to social gender norms that the person manifests” (Siebler 129). In Hansel’s

case, to be legally married to a man, he needed to “follow the logic of heterosexual desire” and become a woman, an identity defined by the heterosexual law of marriage (Mayer 85). When the sex-reassignment surgery failed and caused Hedwig to have the genital of neither a man nor a woman, Hansel was “[l]eft physically indefinable according to binary gender categories” (qtd. in Mayer 83).

Although her surgery was botched and she had no desire to physically transform into a woman in the first place (Jones 462), Hedwig still took on the role of a woman, wearing wigs, makeup and female outfits and doing traditionally female work such as housekeeping and babysitting (Mayer 85). In her daily life, Hedwig repeated the actions representing femininity in society to “assume the female role” (Mayer 85). For example, when Hedwig and her band sat on the bed chatting after finishing a show, Hedwig sat straight with her legs folded to one side while her male bandmates sat with their legs spread open or leaning onto any object they could reach. Although Hedwig does not have breasts like women do, she still wears bras and stuffs apples in them to create the curves of a female body.

On stage, Hedwig does drag. Doing drag, by definition, is wearing clothes which are normally worn by the opposite sex. From Butler’s point of view, drag is an

imitation of gender which usually indicates a lack of agreement between sex, gender and performance, for the sex of the performer and the gender being performed are not the same (Sullivan 86). In the film, drag is used as a means of depicting “a male homosexual negotiation of transsexual panic” which derives from the “collapse in popular consciousness of the categories of woman, homosexual man, transsexual woman, and drag queen” (Jones 450), as Hedwig belongs to none of the categories mentioned above after the botched transgender surgery. Hedwig was originally a homosexual man. After the failed operation, Hedwig became “neither a woman nor a male” physically (Mayer 85). As Jones avers, “Hedwig both is and is not a transsexual person” as she has undergone a transsexual surgery, but the failed operation ridded her of the “physical identity as a woman” (462). In addition, narrowly speaking, Hedwig is not a drag queen because “she is not a man performs as a woman” (qtd. in Mayer 83). Consequently, Hedwig’s feminine outfits become her attempts to “negotiate [her] sex/gender identity” (Mayer 83) in the abject zone between the “binary gender categories” (qtd. in Mayer 83).

Hedwig’s cognition of love, gender and sex came from Plato’s *Symposium* and *Symposium* has become the “guiding metaphor of Hansel’s life” (Jones 451) as she

spent her whole life searching for her other half. This mythical story plays a crucial role in the film, for all the struggles Hedwig went through would not exist without her belief in recovering wholeness and her determination to find her other half, as Hsu puts “without love or Tommy, the story would not exist” (113). In her song “Origin of Love,” Hedwig sings about the three original sexes in Aristophanes’ interpretation of Plato’s *Symposium* – which are the children of the sun (male figures with “two men glued up back to back”), the children of the earth (female figures with “two girls rolled up in one”), and the children of the moon (androgynous figures as “part sun, part earth”) (*Hedwig*). When Zeus cut through the flesh of the children of the sun, of the earth, and of the moon, they became “lonely two-legged creatures” – human beings (*Hedwig*). As a result, both heterosexual and homosexual love emerged because, according to Hsu, every individual half craves to find its other half to “recover the wholeness of the original form” (104). After singing “Origin of Love,” Hedwig said, “It is clear that I must find my other half. But is it a he or a she?” As Hedwig proposed this question, she was not only asking about her other half’s gender but also questioning whether she herself was a he or a she (Jones 455).

All his/her life, Hansel/Hedwig desires to find his/her other half. Hansel could

not find his other half in the east as a man. Therefore, he underwent the transgender operation to escape to the west and then continued searching for his other half as a woman named Hedwig (Jones 456). Due to the failed sex-change operation, Hedwig had neither the male nor female sex characteristics, which confused Hedwig when she tried to align her gender identity with her body. When Hedwig performed as a woman, her ambiguous gender identity was protected by the veil of “reinforced femininity” with her feminine appearance, and by the veil of “supposed heterosexuality” in her romantic relationships (Mayer 85). In her marriage with Luther, Hedwig aligned her identity with her supposed female body created by the sex-reassignment surgery and with her title of “wife” given by law to be a woman. When she was abandoned by Luther, who “first suggest[ed] that Hedwig [wore] women’s clothing” and also “suggest[ed] the change of sex” (Jones 456), her identity deferred because just as she thought she had found her other half in Luther after granting his wishes, Luther turned out to desire young males, rather than the androgynous figure Hedwig had become (Mayer 85).

After the divorce, Hedwig’s ambiguous identity was concealed by her actions which reinforced femininity and she proceeded to engage in another romantic

relationship with Tommy, disguising as a woman. Hedwig's identity was deferred once again when Tommy denied her sexually ambiguous body. The rejection broke the seemingly heterosexual relationship between them, throwing Hedwig into the "marginal position" between man and woman (Mayer 86) and forcing her to face the configuration of her body. As Hedwig accused Tommy of being a "sissy" for not accepting her body and pleaded him to love the "one-inch mound of flesh" (*Hedwig*) in her front, she was also confronting herself for Hedwig did not truly accept her body either. For her, her lost genital was "something [she] had to work with (*Hedwig*)" as she "refuses to accept the separation between the normative male and female gender assignments by hiding the ambiguous configuration of her body" (Mayer 86).

Hedwig's gender was transformed for the last time as she violently got rid of her "drag accessories" in the performance of "Exquisite Corpse," liberating herself from the long-time attempts to "conform to one of the binary gender types" (Hsu 112). According to Hsu, an individual finds his or her other half and makes a whole by "becoming aware of one's gender identification and allowing it to transform through the experience of love" (113). Hedwig finally found her other half within herself as she realized that it was not necessary for her to "assume a sex/gender position" and

that she could be whatever she had become with her after going through all the conflicts during her search for love and for her other half (Mayer 87). While singing “Midnight Radio,” Hedwig stood on stage in only a pair of black shorts which covered her genitals, revealing her body to the audience. In the song, she encouraged herself as well as “all the misfits and the losers” (*Hedwig*) to embrace their queerness and not to be afraid of showing their identities (Hsu 113). Throwing away the burden of performing a female role after experiencing three unforgettable relationships, Hedwig recovered wholeness within herself by accepting her ambiguous body. She “identified with these ‘children of the moon’ (Jones 452),” the androgynous body form in *Symposium*, which is an identity outside of the binary gender categories of man and woman that made her “not a he nor a she anymore,” but “what [she] has become in her trajectory” (Mayer 87).



## 6. Conclusion

*Hedwig and the Angry Inch* reveals that the socially and culturally constructed concept of gender binarism affects Hedwig's changes in terms of biological sex, in terms of how she expresses her gender identity, and in terms of how she identifies herself as male and/or female. From the beginning of Hedwig's story, one can see the constraints caused by the socially and culturally constructed concepts of gender binarism as Hedwig first undergoes a transgender surgery and changes her sex to be a legitimate woman to fulfill the heterosexual law of marriage, the union of two opposite sexes. In addition, Hedwig assumed a female role by dressing herself with female clothing and behaving like how the society expects a woman to behave in order to fit into the category of woman. Finally, Hedwig struggles to align her identity with her sexually ambiguous body throughout her journey of recovering wholeness, only to end up settling with an identity outside of the binary gender categories of man and of woman.

Works Cited

- Dentice, Dianne and Michelle Dietert. "Growing Up Trans: Socialization and the Gender Binary." *Journal of GLBT Family Studies*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2013, pp.24-42. *EBSCOhost*, doi:10.1080/1550428X.2013.746053.
- Hedwig and the Angry Inch*. Directed by John Cameron Mitchell, performances by John Cameron Mitchell, Miriam Shor, Andrea Martin and Michael Pitt, Killer Films, 2001.
- Hsu, Wendy. "Reading and Queering Plato in *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*." *Queer Popular Culture: Literature, Media, Film, and Television*, ed. By Thomas Peele, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, pp. 103-17.
- Jones, Jordy. "Gender Without Genitals: Hedwig's Six Inches." *The Transgender Studies Reader*, edited by Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle, Routledge, 2006, pp. 449-67.
- Mayer, Claudia Santos. "Negotiating Identity in the Abject Zone in John Cameron Mitchell's *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*." *Echoes: Reflections on Language and Literature*, edited by Celso Henrique Soufen Tumolo, Magali Sperling Beck, Malcolm Coulthard, Federal University of Santa Catarina, 2014, pp. 89-94.

Siebler, Kay. "Transgender Transitions: Sex/Gender Binaries in the Digital Age."

*Learning Queer Identity in the Digital Age*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, pp.

123-54, doi:10.1057/978-1-137-59950-6.

Sullivan, Nikki. "Performance, Performativity, Parody, and Politics." *A Critical*

*Introduction to Queer Theory*. NYU Press, 2003, pp. 81-98.

